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METRO

LARGER THAN LIFE



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Local artist Marsha Schindler, left, painted a mural of the Roman goddess Minerva for the office of first lady Maria Shriver. It took Schindler about a week to create the mural, which was painted on removable panels and will eventually be part of an exhibit at the California Museum for History, Women & the Arts.

Local artist's
passion for
painting
murals
leads her to
a high-profile
wall in the
first lady's
office

By Lisa Heyamoto
BEE STAFF WRITER

Earlier this year, Marsha Schindler was standing on a ladder, painting what felt like the thousandth brick into a mural of the Hearst Castle at the California Museum for History, Women & the Arts when she paused for a rare moment of self-doubt.

She was exhausted. As a working artist, she was, as always, grateful for the work, but her painting arm was starting to protest with that familiar ache as her brush continued its relentless path across that museum wall.

"I was up on the ladder, cursing, thinking, 'I'm too old to be painting 100 bricks,'" she said. "And look what happened."

What happened was that California first lady Maria Shriver walked in, fell in love with Schindler's work and asked Schindler, 46, to paint a mural on no less a

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Marsha Schindler
working artist and creator of a mural commissioned by California first lady Maria Shriver

prominent a place than Shriver's office wall.

It was a dream job, probably the most high-profile gig Schindler had been asked to undertake in her 14 years as a professional artist.

But more than that, it was one more example of the kind of personal serendipity

► MURAL, Page B4

Mural: First lady familiar with theme.

► FROM PAGE B1

ity that has been the hallmark of her career.

"I've been lucky to be kind of in the right place at the right time," she said. "I just keep going, and the doors open."

But to get where she is now, Schindler had to open that first door herself. A marine biologist by training and trade, she'd been working in museums in Southern California, all the while admiring the huge murals and dioramas that made up the exhibits.

"I thought, 'Oh man, I want to do that!'" she recalled. So she got a master's degree in art and started fresh, moving up to Sacramento, determined to make art full time.

She started as an apprentice to a local muralist, and when he decided to quit the business, he left it to her — Rolodex full of clients and all. She works primarily on large commercial spaces — the bigger the canvas, the better, she says — bringing to life the erstwhile bare walls of libraries, offices, public spaces and, of course, museums.

"Marsha's the best," said Philip Carey, exhibit designer-coordinator for California State Parks, who has been working with Schindler on projects for a decade. "She's very versatile. I can call her for almost anything, she will never say 'no,' and if she doesn't know how to do it, she will learn how to before she arrives."

But being a working artist hasn't always been easy. It's a tumultuous life, Schindler says, with an income that varies drastically from month to month and a lifestyle to match.

"It's been a long, rough road of beans and rice many a time," she said, laughing.

But she gets to make her own hours and managed to buy a house and support herself and her 14-year-old daughter, Nola, blending jobs the same way she does the paint on her palette.

And the mural for Shriver was something else. The ideas came as organically as her hire, and she chose a theme centered on the Roman goddess Minerva. An agent of wisdom and strength, Minerva is a figure close to the heart of Shriver, who founded an award and a leadership program in the goddess's name.

Schindler dreamed up a vision, presented it for the first lady's approval and was up on a ladder again in almost no time.

It wasn't until she got started that she began to get nervous.

"It began to dawn on me that there are lots of people who move through that office," she said. "I just knew I had to do my best."

She needn't have worried.

"I thought it was fantastic," Shriver said. "I'm thrilled. No one's ever seen anything like it."

Shriver was particularly pleased to have a strong, wise, independent goddess painted by a woman who exemplifies all those qualities.

"Most women I know embody many different characteristics," she said. "For me, (the mural) has been a great addition."

Working through the night, when the busy office was deserted, it took Schindler about a week to complete the project. As usual, she painted the mural freehand, etching Minerva's visage on the wall one brush stroke at a time.

Painted on removable panels, the mural will eventually be part of a broader Minerva exhibit at the California Museum.

"I feel pretty blessed about the whole experience," Schindler said.

So what's next for the artist? As always, only fate and happy accident will tell.

"Who knows?" she said. "That ball is already starting to roll."

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